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LETTER TO A
RETURNING SERVICEMAN

BY
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MY DEAR ROBERT,—

No doubt it is very hard for you to imagine me as anything else but a plump middle-aged author, sitting in a cosy huddle of books, pictures and pipes in my Albany study, where we last met. But I want you to remember that I was once a returning serviceman too. (This is important, so you will please forgive me if I rub it in a bit.) I spent nearly five years in the infantry, was three times a casualty, and saw the flower of my generation mown down among the barbed wire. All the best fellows, as we used to say, "went West," and those of us who were left were a mere remnant, which explains why there has been so little genius and leadership in my generation. I think you celebrated your twenty-first birthday in the desert; I know I celebrated mine in the water-logged trenches of 1915. And I have not forgotten what I thought and felt as a soldier: one doesn't forget, as you will discover. So put out of your mind the notion that you are being got at by a comfortable old word-spinner (and it hasn't been so comfortable either, here in London in this war), and believe me when I tell you that I can remember my own demobilisation as if it happened only a day or two ago.

I hope you will agree with me when I say that the citizen-soldier, as distinct from the professional, finds himself at the end of a modern war a sharply divided man. He faces two ways. There is a conflict in him, and I suspect that it is this conflict that makes him appear less radiantly happy, far more weary and wary, than people expect him to be. One half of him wants to settle up, the other half wants to settle down. Sharing the same billet in his mind are an earnest revolutionary and a tired and cynical Tory. Both of them cry incessantly "Never

again !," but one of them means that never again will he allow the world to drift into the vast lunacy of war, whereas the other means that never again will he quit the safe old shelter of home for any communal adventure. One wants to re-organise society, and the other wants privacy and a domestic life. The red half cries: "It's your duty now to fight for security and social justice for all"; and the blue half retorts: "You've done enough. Find a job, keep quiet, and try growing tomatoes." One demands real democracy and the end of economic brigandage, while the other asks for a bungalow, a car and a good wireless set. The reformer shouts at the cynic, and the cynic sneers at the reformer. And both are performing inside the mind of a tired man, who is homesick and wants to wear his own clothes, to eat what he fancies and to do no more parades.

Now last time, Bob, the reformer, the revolutionary, the one who said there must be no more of this murderous nonsense, lost completely. He never really had a chance. The politicians and most of the Press told him he was a hero and that everything would be all right if he took it easy. His women, who still believed they were living in a nice settled world that happened to have had a nasty accident, told him to dig the garden or take the baby out and not talk so much. The pubs and sports grounds and race tracks were ready to welcome him. Living was dear, but there seemed to be plenty of decent jobs about at good wages. Now and again he would exchange a few drinks with chaps he had served with, and they would grow reminiscent and a trifle sentimental, remembering a comradeship that seemed difficult to fit into this civilian world of social classes and profit-and-loss relationships, with its surface softness and its queer underlying hardness. Most of the newspapers turned out to be wrong, but they never admitted it and always

found something new and exciting for him. (England was in danger again, but this time from the ruthless new Australian Test side.) Most of the politicians were wrong too of course, and they never admitted it either ; and so he began to shrug his shoulders at them. A few men, not very admirable types, grew rich and succeeded at the same time in throwing hundreds of thousands of decent craftsmen—ship-builders, for example—out of work. Russia, it seemed, was a constant menace, according to the newspapers owned by very rich men. The world played power politics again. Dragon's teeth, of a new and marvellous fertility, were sown freely. And the harvest—well, you know.

They tell us that history does not repeat itself. All I can say is that history just now is trying its hardest. The 1918-19 pattern is distinctly visible. Once more you are being told to take it easy and all will be well. Anything that encourages ideas is being frowned upon, but the sports grounds and the light amusements are in full swing. The reformer, the revolutionary, the one who says there must be no more of this murderous nonsense, is being told, in a hundred different ways, not to be an ass and a bore. (Notice how, once the threat of a Nazi invasion was passed, the " Better World " idea was a favourite target for the millionaires' hack writers.) The women, who naturally incline to this view, are being hastily persuaded that we really do live in a nice settled world that happens to have had—well, several nasty accidents. There was a time, round about 1940, when we were able to convince a lot of people that only a diseased and rotten society could have thrown up a Hitler, but since then there has been a huge campaign telling us day and night that it was Hitler who somehow produced, presumably from his box of watercolours, any disease and rottenness there may be in our society. Tory

gentlemen who have clearly not learnt anything, and now never will, confidently offer themselves as our guardians again, assuming that because they choose to forget the sickening muddle, darkening to tragedy, of the Twenties and Thirties, we shall have forgotten too. Men who, when they were in danger in 1940, made haste to enforce government control and asked us to cheer our communal war effort, now thunder on platforms against such controls and denounce all communal efforts. Industrialists who spent years building up vast monopolies and wrecking "little men" now assure us, almost with tears in their eyes, that what they care most about are competition and the economic welfare of the little man. If we had no children and disliked human beings, what a tremendous roaring farce this would be !

Now before I take up the main argument, my dear Robert, I want to dispose of two tricks that are always being worked against me, and will probably be tried on you soon. The first is "Ah, but you're an idealist." This is usually said to me by some pleasant but completely muddle-headed oldish business man, who has been wrong about everything for years. He is quite ready even now to go bumbling along in the same old way, hoping vaguely that some miracle will protect him from the disaster that has always followed this line of conduct. This he calls "realism," and he believes himself to be a hard-headed man. When I remonstrate with him, and point out that he is proposing to go wobbling the same old way to ruin and misery, he says complacently "Ah, but you're an idealist," and usually tells me that I don't understand ordinary human nature. It is no use my retorting that ordinary human nature is just what I do understand, and that I earn my living by that understanding. I waste my time if I try to tell him that, compared with him and his muddle and his vague hopes of an intervening miracle,

I am a realist with a head of teak, and that on every important public issue for the last fifteen years I have been right and he has been wrong. He contrives to forget everything that it is convenient to forget, which explains why his favourite newspapers are so blithely inconsistent and self-contradictory. He protects himself by declaring that I am an idealist, a little Johnny head-in-air, and that when I know as much about human nature as he does then I will change my views. It is he who refused to call Mussolini's bluff, would not intervene in Spain, and allowed Hitler to make himself so strong that we were only saved from slavery and Buchenwald at the last minute ; who thought Churchill a nuisance in June 1939 and a demi-god in June 1945 ; who believes that all countries should export more than they import ; who still assumes that it is only mysterious "agitators" that prevent working folk from wanting to toil until they drop for debenture-holders they have never seen ; who will vote billions of credit in wartime but thinks we cannot afford to do anything in peacetime ; who is bewildered by the failure of investors and producers, clamped into a system that compels them to put profit first, to provide people with what they most badly need ; who supports policies that inevitably lead to war and then wonders why further wars should threaten us. This is the British middle-class "realist," the man who likes to keep his feet on the ground, who has what he calls a "healthy mistrust" of anybody with ideas, who knows all about human nature (unlike the poets and novelists and social philosophers), and who when you try to talk sense to him will smilingly dismiss you as "an idealist." A nice old boy, but more dangerous than dynamite.

The other trick that will be worked against you, just as it has often been worked against me, belongs to the

type of man who imagines himself to be progressive, claims to be with you in denouncing the bad old world, but artfully escapes from making any positive move. He does this by asking you exactly what you want to put in place of the present political, economic and social system, and then points out a few flaws. It is he who detects the crumpled rose petal beneath the seven mattresses. And that is enough for him. "No, no, my boy, you'll have to do better than that," he tells you, and then dozes off again. He imagines—or pretends for his comfort to imagine—that you and he are not trying to find some way out of a nasty mess that threatens to get much worse, but are airily designing Utopias, Islands of the Blessed, Earthly Paradises, Avalon of the unfading apple blossom. He is like a man on a sinking ship who refuses to enter a lifeboat because he does not approve the exact shade of its paint or has taken a dislike to the third mate's nose. I am not being fanciful: he really is as silly as that. Our business now is to save ourselves, as best we can, from even worse disasters than we have known during the last thirty years. We are not choosing perfect holiday resorts but are trying to escape from shipwreck and earthquake. For example, if we cannot prevent a third world war then very soon we shall find ourselves living underground, half-starved, manufacturing nothing but gigantic rockets. If millions are thrown out of employment again, there will soon be terrible social upheavals, and bloody revolution or counter-revolution will follow. If we cannot educate people properly and if we allow them to remain the victims of any catchpenny tactics of mass suggestion, then values will drop to even lower levels, civilisation will decay, and the world will swarm with barbarians and robots. And unless the conscious mind and the unconscious mind of modern man can be brought into harmony,

then there is a danger that destruction, inspired by deep unconscious drives, will overtake construction, and that violence and cruelty will rage throughout whole communities. *And there isn't much time.* So let us have no nonsense from the man who leans back in his armchair, points out a flaw here, a hard case there, and demands nothing less than a complete Utopia delivered in cellophane.

Now for that main argument, Bob, that I promised you after disposing of those two familiar tricks. What is the root cause of all the mischief? No, don't worry—I'm not going to tell you that the world is as it is simply because people are not perfect. Clearly that will get us nowhere. Of course people are selfish, greedy, lazy-minded, intolerant, illogical, timid, and wanting in faith and steadfastness. I am myself, and so are you. But people are also unselfish, compassionate, reasonable, brave, faithful and steadfast. There is enough variety in human beings to prove any argument. We are not at the moment discussing the problem of how to fill the world with shining saints. What you and I—and at least a thousand million others—want to know is how we can avoid more gigantic disasters, how we can live together, as ordinary weak sinful creatures, without starving and bullying and murdering each other, and how we can best use all the new knowledge and skills to give men and women not an Earthly Paradise but at least some semblance of a decent life. What is it that continually frustrates us? What goes wrong? What is the matter with us? Those are the questions that both your generation and mine keep asking. And my answer is this—that we are trying to live in two different kinds of worlds at one and the same time. Or put it this way, that we try to make old patterns of behaviour fit new conditions of living, and it can't be done. One half of us forges ahead

while the other half lingers behind, and the result is an intolerable strain. If we don't catch up with ourselves soon, then we shall burst. Imagine an old coachman, who likes to take a few drinks and to nod over his familiar old horses, suddenly dropped behind the wheel of a high-powered car and ordered to drive at full speed. That is our Twentieth Century.

Let us take another shuddering look at this old coachman and the high-powered car. Clearly this is a disastrous combination. Either we must scrap the car and go back to the old horses, or we must pension off the coachman and find a sober young chauffeur. Now there are some people who would scrap the car. But for one of them there are a thousand others who would exchange the coachman for a chauffeur. And indeed they would be right, if only because our commitments demand a car. It is useless to try to *un-invent*. That is why the moans of elderly scholarly persons about aeroplanes, fast cars, films, radio and so forth, are a mere waste of breath. These and their like are here with us—and notice how the young immediately clutch at them—and it is no use pretending to ignore them, or moaning and groaning over them: the only sensible thing to do is to accept them and to *civilise them*. Of the two kinds of worlds we are trying to live in at the same time, the car represents the world that has a higher degree of reality. In fact you might say that we are in the car without we like it or not, and that therefore we must see that it is driven properly. So I say "Sack the coachman." He still thinks he is driving horses, going journeys of five miles and not five hundred, and is still worrying about hay when he ought to be worrying about oil and petrol. Yet every day you will read in newspapers and hear from platforms all manner of fantastic statements that are nothing but declarations of policy from coachmen. Prime Ministers,

Senators, Prominent Industrialists, Chairmen of Boards of Directors, Bankers, Editors and Publicists—and all coachmen to a man ! And the car, gathering speed, goes roaring and rocking on. No wonder people are worried.

For example, that conference in Chicago about the future of air transport. The delegates to that conference should have had the mental outlook of air pilots, who know that we live on a globe, that aeroplanes fly over frontier after frontier without noticing them, that security and efficiency in the air cannot exist without elaborate international co-operation, and that the question as to who shall make a bit of profit is of very small importance compared with the possible service of flight to mankind. But with the honourable exception of men from two of our Dominions, the delegates who went to Chicago had not the mental outlook of pilots. They were all coachmen. It was really a coachman's conference, and they would have been more safely employed discussing horses and feed and whips. They took a strong nationalist line, as if the subject were post-chaises and not aeroplanes, as if frontiers were ten miles high, as if the very air were different stuff when the flag changed colour. They were determined too, most of them, to have their private enterprise, even if it meant that we shall all have to live in cellars. The idea of removing air transport clean away from nationalism and profit, thus making some kind of move towards a world civilisation, was clearly repugnant to them: better a thousand burning cities. Not that these were bad men; they were decent citizens apparently doing their duty. But they were doing their duty in the Nineteenth Century, while the forces they were playing with were the terrific forces of the Mid-Twentieth. They were coachmen.

If you can thoroughly frighten some of these coachmen, then they will hastily learn how to drive a car after

a fashion. That is what happened here in the Spring of 1940. With the Nazis twenty-one miles away, their bombers over our heads, we had to stop talking nonsense and to produce as many weapons as possible in the shortest possible time. And you must have noticed then, my dear Robert, that all the usual coachman talk was no longer heard. The very industrialists who have taken to condemning government production, government control, government interference, all over again, then in 1940 were delighted to become cabinet ministers and civil servants. They were no longer playing politics but were grappling with a grand reality. "Let us all work together and produce what we need," they cried, still in the shadow of the *Wehrmacht*. That was not the moment to bring out the old coachman objections, sneers, solemn warnings. They rushed to microphones and talked like chauffeur-socialists. But then as the danger receded the coachman talk began again. We should be poor after the war. (They didn't know when the war would end, but they were certain we should be poor the very next day.) The *Coachman Press* began warning us against state control and bureaucracy. Lord Coachman and his friends, safe at last, told us we must return to "free enterprise." Soon they were all back, whip in hand, on their seats. Nothing was said about the 1940 adventure, that leap into the car. Then it was easy, so long as we went to it, to produce planes and tanks and guns, with relatively unskilled labour often working to a thousandth of an inch. Five years later, dazed by all this coachman talk, we are wondering how we can build houses, which to some of us seem a very rough-and-ready job, with no thousandth of an inch about them. But the coachmen won't budge—you may bet on that—until a mass of people, especially chaps like you, suddenly lose their temper, and there is danger in the air again.

A word about finance, Bob. The old coachman idea is that money is the great reality, compared with which skill and labour and materials are mere shadows. The truth is of course that skill and labour and materials are the essentials, and the only essentials, and that national finance—as distinct from money owned by the individual—is simply national accounting. People were just on the edge of discovering this truth at the end of the last war, and then were stampeded away by various interested parties. The result was twenty years of muddle and misery, followed by another war. In this war even the coachmen, except the oldest and silliest, didn't pretend to believe their nonsense about money. They had told us that the Nazis were bankrupt. If they stuck to their old theory, then the Nazis, who behaved as if their bankruptcy didn't matter, would soon have conquered us, because, on this theory, we could not have afforded to fight the war more than a few months. Danger, again, made a great difference. So the theory went, and year after year we carried on the war, spending more than we ever had or ever could have. I remember, somewhere about the middle of the war, when we were spending about eighty millions a week on it, picking up a pre-war Tory pamphlet in somebody's house, and reading in it a tremendous attack upon the Labour Party's programme of improved social services. These, it seemed, might cost us something like forty millions a year, and the writer, at once aghast and triumphant, clinched his argument by demanding to know where these moonstruck fools imagined the nation could find such a vast sum. Well, he knows now. Or—as your generation likes to say—does he? Already I see a few coachmen creeping round the corner, prepared to ask us where on earth we think the money's coming from. Heigh-ho!

You have probably had more than enough of these

coachmen now, and I will drop them. But I must make one point about the car. I said, you remember, that we are in it. This is a very important point. People are apt to think that they are standing outside history, instead of moving along in it. This leads to a view, still common among oldish people, that there is a kind of normality, a safe and settled style of life, to which sooner or later we can return. It is easy to see why oldish people should think along these lines. Their most formative years came in the period before the First World War, towards the end of what seemed a long and comparatively settled era, and that war seemed to them a mere distressing interruption. Hence the mistakes made after the war. The years that followed didn't settle down as they ought to have done, and then, to so many people's indignation or bewilderment, they got worse instead of better, until in the end there was Hitler and hell-on-earth. But there still persisted, like a ghost from some Edwardian garden-party, the notion that there would be a return to the good old settled days, plus a few more recent comforts and conveniences. And this of course is an illusion, and a very dangerous illusion. We are not only moving away from any such return, but we are also moving away at a very great speed. And we are moving faster than we think, simply because our political and economic and social thinking tends to lag so far behind our scientific, mechanical and industrial progress. (Which is the main root of our trouble, as I told you earlier.) Nearly any little shopgirl, with her head full of film stars, and her boy friend, with his head full of aeroplanes, are really—as you would say—far more “in the picture” than most of our public men, who think in terms of a world that has almost vanished. The youngsters may hardly think at all but they have the advantage of behaving as if the actual world were real, while the public man is still pre-

tending he has not yet arrived at it. (Much of the grumbling at the habits and outlook of youth has its source in these cross-purposes. Thus, the young are asked to behave as if the world were secure when they know very well it isn't.) We are not making a mere detour but are travelling rapidly towards something quite different from anything the public man imagines. If we are not moving towards the Socialism of Morris or Robert Blatchford, it is even more certain that we shall not discover, in any possible hard Corporate-State Toryism of 1950, any way back to the sleepy Tory Britain of Lord Salisbury or Balfour.

Most of the Tories I know, muddled sentimentalists, talk as if Disraeli had just walked off the platform. They are three-quarters of a century out of date. But these are not the important Tories, the ones who keep the Central Office going and initiate the big propaganda campaigns. The important Tories don't live in Disraeli's world, even if at times they talk in public as if they did. They are the tough fellows behind the huge monopolies and cartels, the secret emperors and warlords of finance and industry. And they live in our world. They are not coachmen (except in their public utterances) but *chauffeurs who are determined to go their way and not ours*. They are often as ruthless as they are realistic. Their reaction, when alarmed, frequently takes on an ugly shape. Hitler, Mussolini, Franco found allies among them. A group of them in France did all they could to undermine their country's resistance to the Nazis. I suspect that one of two of them here subsidised Mosley and his guard of bruisers. In America they hire strike-breakers, letting loose armed thugs among their employees. And a Britain they controlled would bear no resemblance to a Primrose League rally addressed by A. J. Balfour. It would soon be an industrial despotism, an iron oligarchy,

a Venetian Republic without the art and beauty and long golden afternoons of Venice. Modern industry is no affair of those "little men" about whom all politicians talk such vote-catching nonsense. It is an affair of giant organisations, with a few technical generals deploying whole armies of workpeople. A political democracy that stays outside these organisations is a mere shadow show. Its committees and elections would soon be of less importance than the entertainments in the canteens. Genuine power would remain in a few hands. Gigantic state machinery could soon be erected to compel the masses—and I use the term deliberately, for soon the rootless, powerless and doped folk could rightly be described as "masses"—to toil for these fortunate and powerful few. This was of course the Nazi idea, when you add a few pseudo-mystical German trimmings, and we must not assume yet that we are rid of it.

You see, my dear Robert, modern industry does not really lend itself to the cosy compromises, so dear to the average English mind, of Tory Reformers and Liberals. (And I am referring now to the really big stuff and not to little garages, restaurants and hat shops. I mention this because a good deal of nonsense is left unchallenged just because there is a deliberate and artful confusion of the two types of enterprise, arguments that apply to a small sandwich bar being transferred to the whole iron and steel industry.) Either we must completely socialise these giant industries or we must be ready to see people being enslaved by them. If we socialise them, then perhaps five hundred persons may enjoy less freedom than they did, but on the other hand perhaps about five million persons will be started on their way towards a little more freedom. Not that I like the "freedom" argument, whoever uses it. This general "freedom" that is brought into so many political speeches seems to

me to mean nothing. To mean something it should always be "freedom *from*." We feel we lack freedom when we find ourselves compelled to obey laws, rules and regulations of whose existence we don't approve, being doubtful of their value. Thus, during all these wartime years I must have been moving around under a colossal load of laws, bye-laws, orders in council and restrictions, but I have not felt weighed down by this load, because my acquiescence, my belief in the necessity of having them, at once lightened their weight, and generally I felt free enough. On the other hand, because I never really believed in the black-out, condemning it as an ill-considered bit of panic legislation, I never drew a black-out curtain or groped about in the dark streets without feeling a touch of irritation, a definite loss of freedom. Again, the traffic regulations have never seemed to me a menace to my freedom because I feel safer with them than I would without them; but the whole hocus-pocus of passports and visas, which was clamped on to us during the first World War and never removed afterwards, still seems to me a detestable interference with my liberty.

Long before your time, Bob—and I am just old enough to remember it—there were no queues at the Pit and Gallery doors of theatres. People massed in front of them, then charged in. No doubt for Rugger forwards of an anti-social disposition the present queuing regulations seem a check on the enterprise, initiative and liberty of the individual, but most other people are in favour of them. And to my mind a great many of the controls and threats to freedom, which we have heard so heartily denounced lately, merely represent the sensible change-over from the storming of doors to the orderly entrance of the queue. This is true especially in the economic field. In fact I do not believe in economic liberty at all.

The man who demands it should be closely watched: it is ten to one he has some pet bit of brigandage in mind. Our economic life is necessarily a communal life. We cannot exchange goods and services outside some kind of organised society. Nobody wants the economic liberty of living in the woods, trapping and eating rabbits. And it is absurd to declare that a man has a right to earn his living just as he pleases, for there are whole books of laws and bye-laws to prove that he hasn't. Even the most fervent economic individualists like Sir Ernest Benn (who has organised a Society of Individualists, to prove that he thinks one way and acts in another) would be prepared to denounce the enterprise of burglars and fire-bugs. And I suspect that the real difference, though it is hardly ever mentioned, between the two parties—or, let us say, between Sir Ernest Benn and myself—is not that he likes individual liberty more than I do but that much of what he is still prepared to call legitimate private enterprise, such as the various forms of holding up the public to ransom, my friends and I would denounce as an anti-social activity, which ought to be added to any list of public offences. We are not in fact arguing about liberty at all. Freedom has been dragged in, at the last desperate minute, as a whacking great red herring.

Let us take a quick look at our famous Freedom of the Press. Now anybody is free to publish a national daily paper in Britain—so long as he has about two million pounds to spare. Anybody who does not happen to have that sum at his command will find that this freedom does not amount to very much. In the *Daily Millionaire*, the proprietor, Lord Midas, is free to print what he pleases, within certain legal limits. But nobody else connected with that paper is quite as free as Lord Midas. For example his lordship may have a black list of persons who may not be mentioned in the *Daily Millionaire*

or if mentioned then not praised. This begins to cut down other people's freedom. Again, the big advertisers must not be offended, which means that the advertising manager can take an axe to the freedom of the journalists. In fact, Lord Midas and his friends neatly have it both ways. If you suggest that some control of their mischievous activities might be necessary, they cry: "There must be no threat to the freedom of our noble old Free Press"; and if driven hard, they will even quote Milton. If you then declare that this noble old institution should not be at the mercy of their prejudices and whims, they retort that they have a right to do what they like with their own property. And if what they do doesn't please you, then borrow a couple of million pounds and start your own newspaper. It's a free country, and newspaper ownership is open to anybody, so long as he is about as rich as Lord Midas.

The truth is, my dear Robert—as I have told you before, I think—that many people want to keep their freedom in the wrong place, just as they want to keep their nationalism in the wrong place. If we wish to be fervently nationalistic, then we should keep away from politics and economics, where sooner or later nationalism leads to war, and turn to cultural matters, in which nationalism adds to the variety of life. In the same way, we should not look for individual liberty in our economic life, which after all belongs to the community, but should find it in our cultural and personal life. But the very men who want to behave like economic brigands all day in their business are nearly always those who spend their leisure behaving more like robots than like zestful individuals, who are always following their herd, who are slaves to every dreary convention. I should like to see the English, once they had done their share of the community's work, doing what they damned well pleased;

and refusing once and for all to be bullied by highly organised little gangs of teetotallers, Sabbatarians, and all the unloved and the life-haters. The chief freedom the English people need now is the freedom to have more fun, without regard to the feelings of sour-faced old women and envious old men. We are still suffering from what happened to us during and immediately after the Industrial Revolution, which changed the character of this country. Workers were then herded into the new industrial towns, which were really money-making machines and not places for human beings. The old rich, the land-owning class, were away from it all in their country houses, and so didn't care. The new rich, the Midland and Northern manufacturing classes, were mostly hard-faced Puritans, and so they didn't care. Thus a vast grey dreariness descended upon our industrial regions. (For a detailed description see my *English Journey*.) Four English people out of five lived in towns, and most of those towns were among the dingiest and dullest in the world. And what is the use of blathering about our traditions and glorious history and wealth and Empire if most of our people are condemned to live in towns that are only one remove from slagheaps? If it could have been done without loss of life, then I wish Hitler had blasted and burned down all these monuments of greed and stupidity, so that we could have had new towns, real towns, for our industrial folk.

Let me say a word here for these industrial folk. They are my own people. Although my father was a schoolmaster, I am on both sides of my family descended from West Riding factory workers, who went clattering early every morning to the huge dark mills. It was from these people—men, women and children—that the wealth of Nineteenth Century England came, the mansions and grouse moors and yachts and hot-houses, the silks and

peaches and cigars and old brandies, which were enjoyed far from the reek and muck of the mills. If you knew the trick of it there was an Aladdin's lamp to be rubbed, and these folk were the slaves of the lamp. They had one of the rawest and most damnable deals that any class was ever given. They said good-bye to the sun and the fields. They were banished to a sooty wilderness of brick and stone, and only rarely caught another glimpse of blue daylight. They played their cricket and football (and played them with great heart too) on cindery wastes. They wore clogs and learned to bellow at each other through the din of their machines, and very soon, because there is a god in man as well as a decayed and dingy ape, they evolved clog-dancing and a splendid choral singing. They were herded like the troops of some strange forgotten army, in dark little brick or stone boxes "back o' the mill." And I tell you, Bob, that not only do I feel compassion for these folk, but also I admire them and I love them. A word against them from some idle snob, who probably owes whatever refinement he or she has to their nimble fingers and tired eyes, and my blood begins to boil. I was reading the other day a new novel by Ann Bridge, who writes well but now produces the familiar nonsense, sneering at our industrial workers and praising distant and picturesque peasants. I am tired of these literary ladies and gents who adore peasants. They never see themselves out in the stubborn fields at dawn or driving a hard bargain for a goat or a couple of chickens. No, they always see themselves among the landed proprietors, the aristocrats, breakfasting in bed and then being respectfully saluted as they emerge into a warmed and tidied world. (And they are conveniently forgetting now the shadow of Fascism, any recollection of those hard-eyed young men in uniform who once came bowing among the priests and the countesses.) And let us never forget

this fact, that when Hitler's mad empire threatened our world, the real hard core of resistance to it was found not among peasants, not among landed aristocrats and their fine ladies and priests, not among the barons of big business, but among the industrial workers. Such inheritance as we have was saved for us by the disinherited.

I said earlier that our root trouble was that our political and economic ideas belonged to one age and our inventions and industry belonged to another and newer age. But I have another notion about our trouble, and it is one that I would not mention in a newspaper article or on a public platform but that I will risk dropping into this letter to you. Suppose every age of mankind were given a task to perform, what do you imagine the task of this age to be? Is it not to lift some of the load of want, ignorance, fear and misery, that vast burden older than history, from the shoulders of men and women everywhere? That is what I believe. Ours is the day when uncommon men must plan and toil for common men. It is the time at last when the world must reject the age-old belief that life for most men must necessarily be brief, brutish and sad. I am not talking now of full sunlight but of a glimmer of daylight in the old darkness. It is not Utopia we are planning—that is a long way off—but only the relief of the desperately besieged human family, the man beaten down by hard circumstance, the woman haggard and old long before her proper time, the children for ever hoping when there is no hope. There is no Kingdom of Heaven for us, but we can obtain a brief glimpse of it when we discover that our rescue party, deep in the thickest jungle, has taken a step or two forward in the right direction. At last we have our fellow creatures on our conscience, and from that, I most firmly believe, there is no escape. As you know,

Robert, there are some brilliant literary acquaintances of ours who have pleasantly exiled themselves to Southern California (the choice is significant), where they announce themselves as a kind of new Yogi men, meditating hard to enlarge or change human consciousness. I for one have no quarrel with them, and am prepared to consider all reports of progress they mail to us from Hollywood, but I believe they are on the wrong track, that the change of consciousness has already happened, and that the evidence for that change is best found in the heat and muck of social conflict from which they have fled.

My point is, that willy-nilly Western Man now finds himself linked to his fellows, and can no longer be happy and healthy-minded in a diseased society. He cannot help feeling responsible for other people. He finds it impossible to build a complete high wall around the garden of his private delight : there are always gaps and staring eyes and pointing fingers. We cannot be *indifferent* any longer. There is in us a broad social sympathy that must either be accepted or deliberately stifled. This explains to me, as nothing else does, why reaction now takes so many ugly and violent forms. Reaction leads to murder now because it begins with murder—the murder by the ego of what exists in the mind but is outside the ego, this deliberate stifling of the new sympathy. (Although, strictly speaking, there is no initial murder but only a continued attempted one, in which the victim comes to life over and over again, to haunt and mock, as if to another Macbeth, the raging ego.) It explains too why a determined detachment, like that of the aesthete with his private income and his elaborate tasting of experience, no longer seems to produce anything of value, is bloodless and shrinking, and soon smells of decay. And indeed, in these days, he who is not prepared to demand more life soon makes an unconscious retreat into death-worship.

I said I was a bit shy about this notion. The reason is that I have a rather irrational conviction, which no study of our contemporary history does anything to remove, that whenever our age refuses to undertake this great primary task, tries to wriggle out of it, denies being any brother's keeper, then promptly, as if a judge passed sentence on us in some invisible court, our age is punished, and once again the blood and tears flow. It is as if we were being driven back, by furious angels, to the highroad we were meant to travel. And the faces of the Nazi leaders, the foulest gang in European history, were like monstrous reflections of our own faces in our worst moments. We could still think in terms of individual power, of greed and cunning, of lies and violence, could we? Then here were Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels and Goering, our worst selves with the lid off. And they would blast and burn us, and we should have to blast and burn them, before this next lesson would be ended. Again, glance back over the last twenty-five years and notice how much mischief, deepening to tragedy, has come to us from the fear of the Soviet Union and the ceaseless plotting, by industrial barons working with the Hitlers, Mussolinis and Francos, against the Soviet Union. We have poured enough man-power and materials into this war, into the business of destruction, to have laid the foundations of a world civilisation, and we should not have had this war if in the early Twenties we had stopped besieging and baiting Russia and instead had frankly welcomed the experiment she was making. Whatever their faults the Bolsheviks had put a hand to the great task and were trying to lift the load of want, ignorance, fear and misery from their dumb millions, while the Americans—as they freely admit now—were living in a fool's paradise of money-for-nothing and Martinis, and we were shuffling and shambling along, listening to our

Tory politicians talking their old twaddle and being deceived at election times by any Red letter or red herring. It was at the end of this period that I visited depressed areas and found there whole towns far gone in decay and men and youths who had the grey faces of prisoners of war. So the stick had to come down on our knuckles again. The lesson was still waiting to be learned. It is waiting yet.

You have only to look at the real world, the world of the car and not of the coachman, to see that modern man has recently been well-equipped for the great task. What chiefly distinguishes him from former types of humanity is his new ability to undertake vast corporate enterprises. Modern man is essentially a communal and co-operating man. What he does best—as I have told you before, Bob—is what he does by working with a great many other men. The Italians of the Renaissance or the Elizabethans threw up individuals who cannot be matched to-day, when we have no Leonardo da Vinci or Shakespeare. But we accomplish what would seem miracles to our forefathers—for example, our vast feats of civil engineering, the broadcasting of a symphony concert, even our films at their best—by our new pooling of knowledge and our superb team work. When the American O.W.I. here, with understandable pride, showed us the film they had made about the Tennessee Valley Authority, and I saw how a huge countryside had been transformed and a flood of new life poured into it, I felt as deeply moved as I would have been by a noble work of art. Here at last was the lifting of the burden. (And there never was a better argument for Socialism than this documentary film, although it was made by men who would be instantly alarmed or offended if you called them Socialists.) Here, in this fruitful transformation of a whole countryside, not for any man's profit but for

the general good, modern man was at last beginning to fulfil his destiny. Here we were doing what God intended this generation of men to do. (And the Russians of course had shown us the way too, with their great dams and electrification schemes.) And the lesson now is plain. We shall cease doing this noble work only at the risk of destroying ourselves by war. The vast communal energies of modern man must find equally vast tasks to perform, and if they are not used constructively then they will be used destructively; so that we have the choice of watching old cities burn and crumble or of watching new cities lift their towers to the sun. It is, I declare to you, as simple as that. But if you want it put into the language of leading articles and political platforms, then what about this? Unless the great industrial powers, with their production geared up by war, can solve their marketing problems in a new way, then soon we shall all be fighting again. But if we can begin to raise the standard of living in the world's huge depressed areas, notably India and China, then these marketing problems will shortly solve themselves and the danger of war can be safely passed. And it is here that idealism and the noblest altruism, on the one side, and the plainest realism and self-interest, on the other, come together and find a common plan of action.

But you have probably had enough of large generalisations and world views, my dear Robert, and are ready to remind me that I am writing a personal letter to you, a young Englishman just out of the Army. At the moment you are feeling that what you need is a good fat dose of real private life. You are tired of sharing a camp with a thousand other men and much prefer to share a bedroom and a living room with one special woman. You are eager to swap a hundred comrades, although they may be the salt of the earth, for two or three old friends.

And the shabbiest civilian clothes feel better than the smartest uniform. Oh—for some private life at last! This is what I felt too, twenty-six years ago, when I came out of the Army with an ex-officer's grant for Cambridge. (It was not enough to keep me there, so I had to do some writing and coaching to make up the difference—but that did me no harm.) I had been in touch with the Labour movement, as a youth in Bradford, and some of the earliest writing I did, as a lad who knew nothing and therefore wrote about everything, was for our local Labour weekly. But after the war I turned away from politics, not because my political sympathies had changed but because I felt I needed a private world of a few friends and a lot of books. Movements and organisations and committees made no appeal to me. I did not want to work with other people, not after having had my life cluttered up with other men for nearly five years. I became the typical Englishman behind his high wall and closed door. And I know now that I was wrong.

Oddly enough it was not politics but the Theatre that opened the door and broke down the wall for me. In the early Thirties I turned from novels and essays to plays, and it happened that from the first I took more interest in the actual production of my plays than the average playwright does. Thus I found myself at last leaving the quiet study, the silent rows of books, for the bustle and confusion and the concerted effort of theatrical production. I had to work with other people, and instead of resenting this necessity I liked it. There might be more heartbreaks in the production of a play than in the publication of a book, but there was also much more fun. And something too that was more than fun—a sense of kinship with my fellow workers in the Theatre, so that when a production of mine was threatened with early disaster, what I resented most was not the

affront to my ego—though no doubt that is large and unhealthy enough—but the menace to the hopes and ambitions and the very salaries of the whole loyal sweating team of players, technicians and workers. And when we triumphed, as by great good fortune we often did, I think I can honestly declare that I enjoyed the sight of their beaming faces far more than I did the sound of the applause for my part of the show. And then, going round the country in order to write *English Journey* I discovered that the new little theatres, the Civic Theatres and People's Theatres, were playing a part of the utmost importance. As I said in that book: "These theatres are attracting to themselves the more eager, impressionable, intelligent younger people in these industrial towns, where depression has hung like a black cloud for the last few years. Some of them, in various places, have told me what this dramatic work has meant to them, and in many instances the persons in question have not been producing, designing scenery, playing big parts, but may only have been selling programmes, taking tickets, or doing the accounts. . . . In communities that have suffered the most from industrial depression, among younger people who frequently cannot see what is to become of their jobs and their lives, these theatres have opened little windows into a world of ideas, colour, fine movement, exquisite drama, have kept going a stir of thought and imagination for actors, helpers, audiences, have acted as outposts for the army of the citizens of to-morrow, demanding to live, though they should possibly have less food on their table and shabbier clothes on their backs, a life at once more ardent and imaginative and more thoughtful than their fathers and mothers ever knew. . . ." And I ought to have added that when these theatres opened their little windows, the people looked out of those windows *together*, just

as they had worked together to keep the theatres going. It was the combined effort, the sense of a common purpose, that brought them fun and companionship and gave them strength.

Later, as the Thirties wore grimly on, I began to realise what people were missing by refusing to lead an active political life. This was the strength of the Communists, who had an influence out of all proportion to their numbers, and indeed still have. They brought their young people together and gave them work to do. Then during this war I noticed, as you must have done, how so many people, suddenly plunged into Civil Defence duties, seemed younger and livelier, in spite of long hours of work and much anxiety, than they had been for years before the war. They had left their back gardens and armchairs and wireless sets and made common cause at last with their neighbours. Again, just before writing these pages I made an electioneering tour, to speak for Labour candidates I knew, in the Midlands, the North-East and in the neighbourhood of Glasgow. In many of these constituencies the Labour organisation had had to be improvised, with helpers—often young men and girls who sacrificed their holidays—discovered at the last moment. And candidate after candidate, men and women of very different types and backgrounds, spoke to me with the same glowing enthusiasm of these helpers and of the eager and comradely spirit that seemed to light up their committee rooms. One could see too in the faces of the girls who came running with messages, in the faces of the young men who acted as stewards at our packed meetings, the same glowing enthusiasm; and because they had given so readily, they had also received much in return; and life had now both more meaning and more fun in it, was altogether a richer and more satisfying adventure.

So what? Just this, Bob. Don't, I implore you, sink too deep, too far, into that famous English privacy. You feel at the moment that you can only save your soul by bolting your door and then pottering or brooding in the most delicious seclusion. All right; go and enjoy the secret sweets of our civvy life. Fleet the time carelessly, like Shakespeare's folk in Arden, with your flower beds and bookshelves, your slippers and armchair, your comfortable jokes and tunes on the wireless. But beware. We can keep ourselves to ourselves too long. We can do it until we go stale and dim, like the apathetic herd we were in the Baldwin and Chamberlain era, when we messed about in our back gardens, ran about in our little cars, listened to the crooners and the comics, while the terrible shadows crept nearer. I think we make too much of our separateness in this country. We hurry home too quickly. We are too apt to imagine that life really begins where all broad human relationships end. This is no attack upon the family; and it is significant that in those pre-war years of middle-class seclusion, when whole suburbs were like tree-lined concentration camps, when to be a young wife was often to be sentenced to a term of solitary confinement, there was not more family life but less than there had been before, and the birth-rate dwindled. It is the growing family that keeps our doors open. And that is good, but it is not enough. Beware again the charmed cosy circle. Don't stay too long in that armchair—and be suspicious of all those publicity experts who tell you that you need never move out of it—but get out and about, compel yourself to come to terms with strangers (who will not be strangers long), make one of a team or a group, be both worker and audience, and put a hand to the great tasks.

I know, my dear lad, that all this is just what you don't want to do. You've had it. All right, go off with the

girl and enjoy the loneliest possible holiday, among the mountains, on top of the widest moor, with—

*The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.*

But when you come back, be a real citizen and not a hermit in a bungalow. Remember that even if you are not interested in politics, the fact remains that politics are interested in you, and indeed are busy already shaping your future. Remember that we are *in* history and are not merely watching it stream past us, as if we were sitting in the balcony of the Odeon. If we do not control our lives, then somebody else, probably a rascal, will do it for us. Remember too—and this is hard for the English, who are at once lazy and romantic—that it is much better to create than to inherit and to possess. I am no fussy, am soon wearied by noise and glare and confusion, am as likely as the next man to seek a quiet corner for a smoke, but I declare to you that I would rather see this whole island turned inside out and upside down every ten years, with whole cities pulled down and re-built as if they came out of a child's box of bricks, than I would see these grand folks of ours sinking into apathy again, lulled by the murmurs of fools and rogues. Refuse with scorn the great dope-dreams of the economic emperors and their sorcerers and Hollywood sirens. Don't allow them to inject you with Glamour, Sport, Sensational News, and all the De-luxe nonsense, as if they were filling you with an anaesthetic. Books are good—and they still offer the widest channel of communication for an honest thinker—but perhaps better still, for the modern man with his sense of strain and feeling of separation, are the great communal arts that compel him, in order to enjoy them at all, to become one of an audience, to laugh and weep and wonder in

company with his fellow citizens. Remember that we are never so lonely, so detached, so separate, as we imagine ourselves to be, and cannot escape, even if we go and bleed to death trying to escape, being members of the great human family. And because of the vast powers that are now at our command, only a little way ahead of us is either universal construction or destruction. Every day you will meet quiet capable men and women, who will argue calmly and acutely, proving that all is well, and there will be nothing about them at first to tell you that in fact they are at heart merely haters of life and secret worshippers of death. But you, I know, love life, and have fought hard for it—so now, my dear Robert, come out and live it, and keep on fighting for it. Listen—there goes the last high trembling note of the *Last Post*—and now, listen again, here comes the *Reveille*.

Yours ever,
J.B.P.

P.S. Stop Press—the atomic bomb has arrived. So I repeat—**There isn't much time.**

